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A Cause for Fear

Though Called a Hoax, 'Iron Mountain' Report Guides Some Militias

Work From 1960s Suggests
Federal Raids on Citizens;
Armed Groups See a Plot

Writer Says Book Was Satire

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Scores of Americans believe the government is secretly plotting against them. They think the feds—using helicopters and Russian tanks—are planning to attack and conquer their own people, then turn the whole country over to United Nations rule. They even are convinced that the federal government blew up its own building in Oklahoma City, then arrested a man with possible ties to citizen militias to justify a crackdown on the paramilitary groups.

Do these people know something the rest of the country doesn't? A slim volume called "Report From Iron Mountain" offers a bit of insight into the source of at least some of their beliefs.

Many militia members think the report was written by a group of eminent scholars secretly assembled by the Kennedy administration. These scholars were purportedly charged with determining how the U.S. would deal with peace, free of the Cold War and other conflicts, should it ever come. In clipped, dispassionate tones, the report concludes that a lasting peace might trigger upheaval in a society focused upon war. In the absence of real enemies, it suggests that the government turn on its own people—initiating ritual "blood games," renewing slavery and creating an "omnipotent" international police force.

Passing the Word

Among some militia groups, the report—along with such works as William Pierce's "The Turner Diaries" and Pat Robertson's "New World Order"—is treated as a sort of bible. Militia-oriented publications are salted with references to "Iron Mountain." Dog-eared copies circulate among antigovernment groups. And tiny mail-order houses market videotapes interpreting its every nuance.

To some far-right radicals, "Iron Mountain" is proof of a secret government plot to suppress personal liberties and usher in a New World Order dominated by the U.N. "A group of people got together and said, 'Here is our blueprint for America,'" says M. Samuel Sherwood, founder of the Idaho-based U.S. Militia Association. "It has caused a great deal of alarm."

Says an Oklahoma militiaman: "This is the plan for the destruction of the U.S."

The report "has taken on a life of its own in the 'patriot movement,'" says Chip Berlet of Political Research Associates, a Cambridge, Mass., research group that tracks right-wing groups. "It is one of their major influences."

Cold War Genesis

The history of "Iron Mountain" is more bizarre than most might imagine.

Go back to 1967. Conspiracy theorists were still picking over the assassination of President Kennedy, bloody race riots had burned through Newark and Detroit, and corpses in body bags kept arriving from Vietnam even as square-jawed generals were promising victory.

Amid the uncertainty, galleys of an unsettling 109-page manuscript began circulating among politicians, journalists and literati in Washington and New York. Titled "Report From Iron Mountain on the Possibility and Desirability of Peace," it was said to have been written anonymously by a prominent Midwest social-science professor. He was identified only as "John Doe." After much soul-searching, he had purportedly asked his friend, editor Leonard C. Lewin, for help in getting the suppressed document published.

According to an introduction that Mr. Lewin wrote under his own name, John Doe and 14 other scholars were part of a top-secret "Special Study Group" summoned to a huge underground bomb shelter near Hudson, N.Y., in summer 1963. For more than two years, Mr. Lewin wrote, they worked "to determine, accurately and realistically, the nature of the problems that would confront the United States if and when a condition of 'permanent peace' should arrive, and to draft a program for dealing with this contingency."

Reliance on Combat

Their report was supposed to be a hard-nosed assessment that put aside religious and cultural values. The group was said to have concluded that lasting peace probably wasn't in the best interests of a stable society. War was necessary both as a source of employment and as a galvanizing external threat that made citizens accept the rule and direction of their political leaders.

"War fills certain functions essential to the stability of our society," Mr. Lewin wrote. "Until other ways of filling them are developed, the war system must be maintained—and improved in effectiveness."

But it was the dark menu of possible war substitutes, laid out in cold think-tank jargon, that created a stir among early readers in the Cold War era. As part of a search for "alternate enemies," the government might instigate massive environmental pollution or create a fictional extraterrestrial threat. A national-service program might be used as the first step toward a more palatable form of servitude.

Meanwhile, birth-control drugs could be added to food and water supplies for

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population control, and "individual aggressive impulses" might be tamped down by creating organized blood sports modeled after witch hunts.

"What they asked us to do, and what I think we did, was to give the same kind of treatment to the hypothetical problems of peace as they give to a hypothetical nuclear war," Mr. Lewin quoted John Doe as saying. "We may have gone further than they expected, but once you establish your premise and your logic, you can't turn back."

Given the tumultuous times when the document surfaced and the air of respectability surrounding those involved with it, few readers were willing to dismiss the mysterious headline-grabbing book as a hoax.

Its publisher, Dial Press, was a feisty but well-regarded house whose chief editor, E.L. Doctorow, would later gain fame for novels such as "Ragtime." In November 1967, Dial's president vouched for the work's authenticity on the front page of the New York Times.

Esquire magazine published a 28,000-word condensation of "Iron Mountain" in its December 1967 edition. Even book reviewers who questioned its authenticity praised it as an important piece of political satire. Meanwhile, publications from Time magazine to The Wall Street Journal sought the real John Doe.

Unusual Suspects

Economist Kenneth Boulding, New Yorker writer Richard Rovere and novelist Vance Bourjaily were all mentioned as suspects. Harvard's John Kenneth Galbraith stepped forward to deny authorship, as did the Hudson Institute. Meanwhile, the White House disputed the report's genuineness and the State Department said that it was unaware that any such study group had ever existed.

"Everyone was accusing everyone else of authoring it," recalls Irving Lewis Horowitz, a Rutgers University sociologist and longtime editor of Trans-action, then a widely read sociology bimonthly that devoted a 1968 issue to the work. "The real thing was its plausibility factor," he adds. "The whole Vietnam pathology was in full swing, creating an aura of conspiracy."

"Some of us nailed it as a hoax right off the bat," says Murray Weidenbaum, a Washington University economics professor who was President Reagan's chief economic adviser. "But some people were taken in by it. It has a certain degree of plausibility if you are not familiar with how government reports are written."

By early 1968, the report had climbed onto the New York Times list of nonfiction bestsellers. For the next few years, university seminars and scholarly journals continued to debate it. The book was translated into 15 languages before Mr. Lewin decided he had had enough.

"I wrote the 'Report,'" he confessed in a 1972 essay in the Times Book Review.

"All of it."

In the piece, Mr. Lewin said he had simply hoped to "pose the issues of war and peace in a provocative way" and "perhaps, with luck, to extend the scope of public discussion of 'peace planning' beyond its usual stodgy limits."

Mr. Lewin said he had decided to end the charade after reading the "Pentagon Papers" and other government reports and think-tank studies that were then being leaked. "Some of the documents read like parodies of 'Iron Mountain,' rather than the reverse," he wrote.

A Reprise

Mr. Lewin's book went out of print in 1980 and faded from public view. But the "Iron Mountain" hoax soon came back to haunt its creator in a chilling new fashion.

In the mid-1980s, Mr. Lewin received what he considered a puzzling request: A white-supremacy group in Arkansas called, wanting to buy any remaining copies of the book he might have. He declined.

He heard nothing more until about 1990, when he was shown an ad offering mail-order copies of the book in the Spotlight, a widely circulated weekly that is popular among militia members seeking stories about possible U.N. troop movements and potential government plots against freedom. It is published by the Liberty Lobby, an ultraconservative group founded by Willis Carto, who also launched the California-based Institute for Historic Review, which has disputed traditional views about the Holocaust.

Mr. Lewin also learned that his book was being offered through the Noontide Press, a California publishing house. Its catalog includes the likes of Nazi leader Hermann Goering's authorized biography and volumes of Holocaust revisionism such as "Six Million Lost and Found."

When Mr. Lewin finally got a copy of one of the new "Iron Mountain" editions, he found that the cover had been changed. The promotional blurb on the back seemed to acknowledge his 1972 admission that he had written the book, but it also suggested something else: "Does editor Leonard Lewin's claim of authorship represent the truth? Or was it just another move in the deception game being played with exceptional cunning and skill?"

Filing Suit

In 1992, Mr. Lewin filed a copyright-infringement suit against the Liberty Lobby and other defendants in federal court in Washington. In the suit, he claimed full authorship and said he hadn't given the defendants permission to reprint or sell the book.

Liberty Lobby denied the charges, claiming in part that "Iron Mountain" was a government document and therefore not subject to copyright laws.

Liberty Lobby's attorney was Mark Lane, author of "Rush to Judgment," one of the first conspiracy books to challenge

the Warren Commission's report on the Kennedy assassination. "I had a client who said, 'How do we know it's not a government document?'" Mr. Lane says. "First [Mr. Lewin] said it was, then he said it wasn't. We had no basis to make a determination."

But midway through a 1993 deposition of Mr. Lewin, Mr. Lane says that both he and his client, Mr. Carto, the Liberty Lobby founder, decided that Mr. Lewin was indeed telling the truth about having written the document. "There is no doubt in my mind that it is not a government report," Mr. Lane says.

Late last year, the case was settled. Although neither side will discuss details, Mr. Lewin says that, as a result, he now has more than 1,000 copies of "Iron Mountain" in storage.

While other unauthorized editions of it are rumored to be for sale through other mail-order houses, Mr. Lewin hasn't seen them. Nor has he watched any of the interpretive videos, such as the six-hour tape that Mark Price has been working his way through.

"There's been no accountability," Mr. Price, a Michigan Militia co-founder, says when asked about its message. "It goes back to Kennedy."

George Eaton, publisher of Patriot Report, a movement journal in Arkansas, has heard that some people have dismissed the book as "bad satire," but he still believes in it. "It was an official document, done by the will of the president and secreted away so that it wouldn't be released to the public," he says. "It shows that there is a conspiracy against the citizens."

No one is more puzzled and perplexed by such talk than Mr. Lewin, now 78 years old, who set out nearly 30 years ago to write a book that would make antiwar protesters think harder about the implications of the peace that they were demanding.

These days, he is horrified to learn that the political satire he patterned after the works of Jonathan Swift and George Orwell may inadvertently have fed the mistrust and hate that paved the way for last month's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, in which at least 164 people were killed.

"It never occurred to me that this was the kind of stuff that would appeal to the sort of people we're talking about now," he sighs. "This is the kind of thing that makes me want to throw up."

Raw-Steel Production Decreases

WASHINGTON—Raw-steel production by the nation's mills decreased 2.1% last week to 1,953,000 tons from 1,995,000 tons the previous week, the American Iron and Steel Institute said.

Last week's output increased 1.4% from the 1,927,000 tons produced a year earlier.

The industry used 91.0% of its capability last week, compared with 92.9% the previous week and 92.3% a year ago.

The American Iron and Steel Institute reported:

	Net tons produced	Capability utilization
Week to May 6, 1995	1,953,000	91.0
Week to April 30, 1995	1,995,000	92.9
Year to date	36,388,000	94.1
Year earlier to date	33,424,000	90.3

The capability-utilization rate is a calculation designed to indicate at what percentage of its production capability the industry is operating in a given week.